

IN THE CLAIMS:

The following is a complete listing of the claims in this application, reflects all changes currently being made to the claims, and replaces all earlier versions and all earlier listings of the claims:

Claim 1. (Withdrawn) An image processing method comprising:

an input step, of inputting at least two medical images taken at different points in time;

a difference image generating step, of generating a difference image by positioning two medical images input in said input step and subjecting image signals at corresponding coordinate points to difference processing;

a difference image storing step, of storing the difference image generated in said difference image generating step in a storage medium;

a reference difference value deciding step, of deciding a reference difference value in the difference image stored in said difference image storing step;

a state selecting step, of allowing a user to select a state of shadow change to serve as an indicator of interpreting the difference image generated in said difference image generating step;

a difference image processing step, of processing the difference image based on the reference difference value decided in said reference difference value deciding step and the state of shadow change selected in said state selecting step; and

an output step, of outputting the difference image processed in said

difference image processing step.

Claim 2. (Withdrawn) An image processing method according to Claim 1, wherein, in said reference difference value deciding step, the reference difference value is decided based on a histogram of difference values in the difference image.

Claim 3. (Withdrawn) An image processing method according to Claim 1, wherein, in said difference image processing step, the difference value of a region in a state not selected in said state selecting step is converted into the reference difference value.

Claim 4. (Withdrawn) An image processing method according to Claim 1, wherein, in said difference image processing step, said difference image is subjected to gradient conversion such that a region in a state not selected in said state selecting step is relatively low in contrast.

Claim 5. (Withdrawn) An image processing method according to Claim 1, further comprising:

    a binary image generating step, of binarizing the difference image processed in said difference image processing step to generate a binary image; and

    a counting step, of counting the number of regions having a predetermined area in the binary image generated in said binary image generating step,

    wherein the processing results of said counting step are output with the

difference image in said output step.

Claim 6. (Withdrawn) An image processing method according to Claim 1, wherein the state of shadow change to be selected by a user in said state selecting step is selected from at least one of a state of displaying all shadows, a state of displaying increase of a shadow, and a state of displaying disappearance of a shadow.

Claim 7. (Withdrawn) An image processing apparatus comprising:

- input means for inputting at least two medical images taken at different points in time;
- difference image generating means for generating a difference image by positioning two medical images input by said input means and subjecting image signals at corresponding coordinate points to difference processing;
- difference image storing means for storing the difference image generated by said difference image generating means in a storage medium;
- reference difference value deciding means for deciding a reference difference value in the difference image stored by said difference image storing means;
- state selecting means for allowing a user to select a state of shadow change to serve as an indicator of interpreting the difference image generated by said difference image generating means;
- difference image processing means for processing the difference image based on the reference difference value decided by said reference difference value deciding

means and the state of shadow change selected by said state selecting means; and

output means for outputting the difference image processed by said difference image processing means.

Claim 8. (Withdrawn) An image processing apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said reference difference value deciding means decides the reference difference value based on a histogram of difference values in the difference image.

Claim 9. (Withdrawn) An image processing apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said difference image processing means converts the difference value of a region in a state not selected by said state selecting means into the reference difference value.

Claim 10. (Withdrawn) An image processing apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said difference image processing means subjects the difference image to gradient conversion such that a region in a state not selected by said state selecting means is relatively low in contrast.

Claim 11. (Withdrawn) An image processing apparatus according to Claim 7, further comprising:

binary image generating means for binarizing the difference image processed by said difference image processing means to generate a binary image; and  
counting means for counting the number of regions having a

predetermined area in the binary image generated by said binary image generating means,

wherein the processing results of said counting means are output with the difference image by said output means.

Claim 12. (Withdrawn) An image processing apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein the state of shadow change to be selected by a user by said state selecting means is selected from at least one of a state of displaying all shadows, a state of displaying increase of a shadow, and a state of displaying disappearance of a shadow.

Claim 13. (Currently Amended) An image processing method for generating a difference image from a first radiographic image and a second radiographic image, said method comprising:

a decision step, of deciding which one of a shadow increase region or a shadow decrease region of the difference image of the first radiographic image and the second radiographic image is to be displayed as a high-concentration region or a low-concentration region;

an image processing step, of changing the first radiographic image and/or the second radiographic image into a negative image or a positive image based on the decision in said decision step; and

a computing step, of computing ~~[[a]]~~ the difference image from the first radiographic image and the second radiographic image changed in said image processing step.

Claim 14. (Previously Presented) An image processing method according to Claim 13, further comprising:

an image attributes acquisition step, of acquiring image attributes of the first radiographic image and the second radiographic image,

wherein said image processing step includes changing the first radiographic image and/or the second radiographic image into a negative image or a positive image based on the decision in said decision step and the image attributes of the first radiographic image and the second radiographic image acquired in said image attributes acquisition step.

Claim 15. (Previously Presented) An image processing method according to Claim 13, wherein said image processing step includes a gradient inversion step, in which gradient inversion processing is performed on the first radiographic image and/or the second radiographic image.

Claim 16. (Canceled)

Claim 17. (Previously Presented) An image processing method according to Claim 13, wherein the first radiographic image and the second radiographic image are images taken of the same portion of a human body at different points in time.

Claims 18 and 19. (Canceled)

Claim 20. (Currently Amended) An image processing apparatus for generating a difference image from a first radiographic image and a second radiographic image, said apparatus comprising:

decision means for deciding which one of a shadow increase region or a shadow decrease region of the difference image of the first radiographic image and the second radiographic image is to be displayed as a high-concentration region or a low-concentration region;

image processing means for changing the first radiographic image and/or the second radiographic image into a negative image or a positive image based on the decision of said decision means; and

computing means for computing [[a]] the difference image from the first radiographic image and the second radiographic image changed by said image processing means.

Claim 21. (Previously Presented) An image processing apparatus according to Claim 20, further comprising:

image attributes acquisition means for acquiring image attributes of the first radiographic image and the second radiographic image,

wherein said image processing means includes means for changing the first radiographic image and/or the second radiographic image into a negative image or a positive image based on the decision in said decision means and the image attributes of the first radiographic image and the second radiographic image acquired by said image attributes

acquisition means.

Claim 22. (Previously Presented) An image processing apparatus according to Claim 20, wherein said image processing means includes gradient inversion means, where gradient inversion processing is performed on the first radiographic image and/or the second radiographic image.

Claim 23. (Canceled)

Claim 24. (Previously Presented) An image processing apparatus according to Claim 20, wherein the first radiographic image and the second radiographic image are images taken of the same portion of a human body at different points in time.

Claims 25 - 27. (Canceled)

Claim 28. (Currently Amended) A computer-readable storage medium storing a computer-executable program having program codes for causing a computer to execute an image processing method for generating a difference image from a first radiographic image and a second radiographic image, ~~said program comprising~~ said computer-readable storage medium comprising:

a code for a decision step, of deciding which one of a shadow increase region or a shadow decrease region of the difference image of the first radiographic image and



the second radiographic image is to be displayed as a high-concentration region or a low-concentration region;

a code for an image processing step, of changing the first radiographic image and/or the second radiographic image into a negative image or a positive image based on the decision in said decision step; and

a code for a computing step, of computing ~~[[a]] the~~ difference image from the first radiographic image and the second radiographic image changed in said image processing step.

Claims 29 and 30. (Canceled)